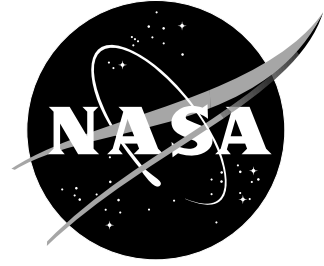


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Mars scientist and astrobiology architect, Dr. Gerald Soffen, dies

NASA scientist Dr. Gerald Soffen, who led the Viking science team that performed the first experiments on Mars, died Nov. 22 at George Washington University Hospital in Washington, D.C. He was 74.

Soffen served as project scientist of the Viking Mars Project while at NASA's Langley Research Center in Hampton, Va. The two Viking landers reached the Martian surface two months apart in 1976.

More recently, as a close advisor to NASA Administrator Daniel S. Goldin, Soffen helped shape NASA's astrobiology program -- the study of life in the universe. Soffen also was instrumental in the establishment of the NASA Astrobiology Institute dedicated to studying the origin, evolution, distribution and destiny of life in the universe.

"Dr. Soffen brought a vision and passion to space exploration that was remarkable," said Goldin. "His pioneering work on the Viking missions paved the way for the creation of our astrobiology effort. Gerry's lasting legacy to us is he helped usher in a new era of discovery that will bring a new understanding of fundamental life processes on Earth and throughout our universe."

Twin robot landers, launched in 1975, touched down on the Red Planet a year later -- the first missions to perform unmanned experiments on the surface of the planet. Soffen was responsible for all of the scientific investigations, directing the activities of more than 70 scientists through the United States.

Later at Langley, Soffen served as the chief environmental scientist, developing theoretical models, laboratory experiments, ground-based measurements and remote sensing by satellite.

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“Space has lost one of its true adherents,” Dr. Jeremiah F. Creedon, director of NASA Langley, said of Soffen’s death.

Soffen had been planning the 25th anniversary celebration of the Viking landings, said A. Gary Price, a former NASA Langley senior manager who worked with Soffen on the Mars mission and stayed in touch over the years.

“But even then his emphasis was not on the past but on doing something to inspire and excite the youth and the next generation of young leaders and scientists to carry on his dream,” Price said. “He cared immensely about others and never tired of pursuing his passion, the search for extraterrestrial life and the understanding of our universe.”

In 1978 he was named director of Life Sciences at NASA Headquarters in Washington, D.C., where he directed programs to ensure the medical and biological well being of space shuttle astronauts and oversaw biomedical, space biology and exobiology programs.

Soffen joined NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Md., in 1983 where he helped to establish the Mission to Planet Earth program and served as the project scientist for the Earth Observing System at its beginning. Soffen formed the University Programs Office at Goddard in 1990. In 1993, Soffen created the NASA Academy, a summer institute of higher learning to help guide future leaders of the space program.

“Science and students were his loves,” said Goddard’s director, Al V. Diaz. “He was one of the finest scientists I had had the pleasure to work with. He was a brilliant researcher, but what made Gerry really special was his lifelong passion for sharing his extraordinary knowledge with young people. The agency and the nation will continue to benefit enormously from the talented young people he has brought into the scientific community.”

Soffen began his NASA career more than 30 years ago at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, where he managed biological instrument development at the Pasadena, Calif.-based facility.

Soffen was born in Cleveland, Ohio on Feb. 7, 1926. He received his Ph.D. in biology in 1961 from Princeton University. He earned his master's of science degree from the University of Southern California and bachelor's degree from the University of California, Los Angeles.

He is survived by his wife, Kazuko, and a sister, Nancy Guy, who lives in California. Soffen will be buried in Hampton, Va. A graveside ceremony will be held Sunday, Nov. 26 at 1 p.m. at the Park Lawn Memorial Park in Hampton. Immediately afterward, a reception will be held at the Virginia Air and Space Center on Settler's Landing Road in Hampton.